KNOWLEDGE SHARING FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SERVICE LEARNING CHAMPIONS

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Abstract

Champions engage in knowledge sharing within triad service learning partnerships. However, the role of knowledge sharing in the development of champions needs further exploration. This qualitative study within a constructivist paradigm, shares the effect of mutual learning at the University of the Free State in the nursing education field. Selected international, national, regional and local champions shared perceptions through semi-structured interviews, indicating that: (1) champions could be situated in any sector of the triad model; (2) sharing different kinds of knowledge develop different domains; and (3) connection, collaboration and continuous communication should guide knowledge sharing towards societal change and reciprocal empowerment.

Keywords: Champions, knowledge sharing, partnerships, reciprocal empowerment, service learning

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Service learning (SL) is a complex and dynamic pedagogy, which may have a profound impact on the learning of those involved. At the University of the Free State (UFS), South Africa (SA), a thorough grasp of this complexity and dynamics is conveyed in its institutional policy where SL is described as:

> …curriculum-based, credit-bearing learning experiences in which students participate in contextualised, well-structured and organised service activities aimed at addressing identified service needs in the community, and reflect on the service experiences in order to gain a deeper understanding of the linkage between curriculum content and community dynamics, as well as achieve personal growth and a deeper sense of social responsibility. It requires a collaborative partnership context that enhances mutual, reciprocal teaching and learning among all members of the partnership (lecturers and students, members of the communities, and representatives of the service sector) (UFS 2006: 10).

Making all of the above a reality, calls for knowledge sharing (KS) and co-creation of understanding among those participating (Shumer 2000: 77). For the purposes of this article, KS is defined as the process of exchanging knowledge, skills, experience and understanding among researchers, policy makers and service providers (Tsui et al. 2006: 5). At the UFS, a triad

partnership model, adapted from the Community – Higher Education – Service Partnerships (CHESP) initiative, is followed. Knowledge is shared between partners from higher education (HE); the service sector and the community (Bender et al. 2006: 93). Here, academic staff and students, service sector partners, inter alia from non-profit organisations (NPOs), as well as members of communities, can share knowledge towards mutual learning as engaged SL scholars within a 'scholarship of engagement' (Boyer 1996: 148).

It is significant to KS that champions engage at the heart of SL, as a collaborative endeavour. A champion is a partner who is "by virtue of being a champion", a role model for others in the field of SL (Jordaan 2013: 221). Erasmus (2007: 110) contends that SL champions often bear the brunt for change by venturing into the largely "unchartered waters" of SL in the SA context. Although KS is recognised as being part of SL partnerships – as made evident by the word 'learning' in 'service learning' – there seems to be a gap in the literature regarding the role of KS in the development of champions for SL.

Thus, we (as authors of this article) argue that if we share the knowledge of selected champions for SL in a partnership context, new champions can be developed and inspired to carry the knowledge torch forward towards developing the field. This article aims to share perceptions of selected champions for SL within specific partnerships and focuses on the role of KS in the development of current and new champions for the field.

In this study, the CHESP triad partnership model was followed, as specified in the UFS service learning policy (UFS 2006: 10). The qualitative study, informed by semi-structured interviews, was demarcated within higher education studies, in particular nursing education (NE). Registered nurses complete a one year post-graduate Advanced Diploma in Nursing Education (hereafter called the programme) at the School of Nursing, UFS. SL, among others, is used as pedagogy. It is essential to note that since 2001 long-term partnerships have been established between the academics at the School of Nursing (HE), managers and staff at different NPOs (service sector), and underserved communities. At the onset of the programme, the class of about 20 NE students is divided into four groups. Each group of NE students is connected to an NPO. NE students apply curriculum-based educational practices advised by the service sector, and reflect on their own service activities, thereby learning from practical experience. The value of the study demonstrated the mutual benefit for the managers and personnel at the NPOs, by receiving, applying and sharing knowledge to develop champions for SL and transform communities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A brief literature review touches on the most salient aspects of SL and KS.

2.1 Theoretical framework of service learning

Experiential education forms the pedagogical foundation of SL (Bender et al. 2006: 14). SL evokes constructivism, where humans learn through interaction between their experiences and ideas. The experiential learning theories of Bandura (1977), Coleman (1977), Freire (1973), Kolb (1984) and others (Bender et al. 2006: 14) guide the SL pedagogy. SL focuses on involvement, and collaborative and engaged learning, which are congruent with the notion of facilitation of learning (Gelmon et al. 2001).

2.2 Benefits of service learning

Within a partnership context, literature describes development in the following areas and sectors:

- **Higher education:**
- students' professional skills and competencies; integration of theory and practice; collaboration with other partners; reflective critical thinking; academic learning; personal growth and social responsibility (Coles 2005: 86; Yusop & Correira 2013: 224-225)
- academics' scholarly development (Stanton & Erasmus 2013: 88)

- **Service sector and communities:**
- partners' healing from hurt during post-apartheid era; self-worth (Venter 2013: 124); speaking back at academia (Erasmus 2007: 123)

However, within diverse partnerships, challenges remain a reality.

2.3 Service learning challenges

Again, literature describes challenges:

- **Higher education:**
- scholars' uncertain footprint; stigma; political agendas; dichotomies in SL concepts; lack of financial assistance (Butin 2006; Naudé 2007: 170; Erasmus 2014: 106)
- academics and students' time constraints; chaotic institutional organisation, inadequate training; lack of incentives to engage in SL (Venter 2013: 124; Yusop & Correira 2013: 227-228; Eyler et al. 2001: 21)

- **Service sector and communities:**
- partners' fear of powerlessness in comparison to academics' power (Kaars & Kaars 2014: 169)

To gain a better understanding of these issues, SL requires partners to engage in reflection (Naudé 2007: 187).

2.4   Reflection on service learning experiences

SL pioneers, Bringle and Hatcher (1999: 153), describe reflection as a process of looking back at actions taken, whether they had positive or negative consequences, and learning from them. Zuber-Skerritt (2013: 14) states that reflection on action plays a vital part in learning and refers to a "reflective practitioner" as someone who continuously searches for knowledge connected to practice. Structured reflection can be based on various reflection models such as the three-stage model (Toole & Toole 1995), the Objective, Reflective, Interpretive, Decisional (ORID) model and the Describe, Examine, Articulate Learning (DEAL)) model (Bender et al. 2006: 67-72). Collaborative reflection could deepen relationships in partnerships.

2.5   Partnerships in service learning

A partnership is an alliance between two or more organisations that commit themselves to work together towards a common goal, share risks and benefits and review the partnership when necessary (Bender et al. 2006: 93). Partnership relationships have qualities such as closeness, equity and integrity (Bringle, Clayton & Price 2009). Wenger (2014) describes such a collaborative environment as a community of practice:

> *…groups of people who share a passion for something that they know how to do and who interact regularly in order to learn how to do it better*

In SA, the triad partnership model mimics such a community of practice and serves as a vehicle to connect HE and the community (Bender et al. 2006: 93). KS can occur within such communion.

2.6   Knowledge sharing

As defined in the introduction, KS entails an exchange of knowledge, skills, experience and understanding. The alignment between KS and learning domains is reflected in the learning taxonomy of Gagné where knowledge exchange is achieved through three domains, namely the cognitive (head), psychomotor (hands) and affective (heart) (Van der Horst & McDonald, 2005: 31). KS in SL can be related to academic curriculum-based content (head), which is linked to experience and reflection (head and hands) towards responsible citizenship and the common good of society (heart).

3.   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the study that this article is based on was to explore the perceptions of selected champions for SL within partnerships focussing on SL-related KS. The objectives of the research were to:

•   determine who the champions in the SL partnerships are;
•   explore the perceptions of various carefully selected champions regarding the role of KS in developing champions for SL; and
•   develop guiding principles for the KS process among SL champions in community engaged partnerships.

As researcher (i.e. the first author of the article), I chose to use the constructivist paradigm and interpretivist approach. People have the ability to interpret a situation and decide how to react on the situation (cf. Botma et al. 2010: 42). I supported democratic critical citizenship, reciprocity and social responsibility within the partnerships in support of social justice for all. In my opinion, reality is constructed by multiple, socially constructed realities. I observed that, despite attempts and efforts to overcome inequities of the past, a considerable degree of inequality still exists in SA.

Over time, I became aware of a distinct relationship between partners in the partnerships. Values were clarified through reflective KS, which created a connected awareness of understanding in our community of practice (Wenger 2014). As a scholar, I believe that engagement in SL partnerships is of critical importance in promoting dialogue towards co-creation of knowledge that is relevant and useful in the SA context.

The study was qualitative, explorative and descriptive (cf. Botma et al. 2010: 109; Mertens, 2010: 225). It is contextual to the specific SL partnerships that were formed between the UFS and the selected underserved community, which forms part of Mangaung, Bloemfontein.

The population comprised of SL champions within partnerships, related to the already mentioned programme, inclusive of the HE sector, the service sector and the community, as well as international SL pioneers. A sample of information-rich participants was purposefully selected to represent the previously mentioned groups with whom I work in daily practice (cf. Botma et al. 2010: 199). The participants had to adhere to one or more of the following sampling criteria (cf. Bryman 2012: 419):

•   They had to have assisted in the initial guiding and establishing of a SL practice in SA.
•   They had to have shaped my comprehension of SL knowledge, either through literature or by being actively involved in my scholarly journey.
•   They had to have championed for SL by sharing knowledge in my local partnership context.

In addition to the above, opportunistic sampling was used to capitalise on opportunities to collect data from participants, where contact is largely unforeseen, but who may provide rich data relevant to the research questions (cf. Bryman 2012: 225). International academic SL pioneers, who attended SL conferences, were thus included. I conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews. The participants included four academic staff members, one of whom was also an academic community engagement pioneer, actively involved in the initiation of community engagement at the School of Nursing, UFS. The sample also included two NE students involved in the programme, three managers from different NPOs, a community leader and five international academic SL pioneers. I recorded and transcribed the interviews personally, benefitting from being personally immersed in the data. Thereafter the data was analysed.

A systematic analysis was conducted as advised by Mertens (2010: 424-426) and Botma et al. (2010: 221-225). During the interviews I verbally verified that I clearly understood what the interviewees shared and added field notes where needed. Trustworthiness guidelines were followed as advised by Botma et al. (cf. 2010: 233). I kept a reflective stance throughout the research process. Following the advice of Botma et al. (2010: 230-235), accurate documentation of data was adhered to. Credibility of the data was ensured through peer debriefing (with two experienced researchers) (cf. Mertens 2010: 431). In selecting the participants, multiple sources were used, including representatives from the four different groups mentioned in the introduction. These different views then acted like a prism and contributed to the interpretation of the data (cf. Mertens 2010: 429).

The ethics board of the UFS Faculty of Education granted ethical clearance before the research was conducted. Guidelines pertaining to privacy, informed consent, honesty, no harm and the maintenance of ethical standards were applied (cf. Chapdelaine et al. 2005: 10-11). Ontological values of trust and care were followed and the fact that the participants were identified as champions acted as recognition and reward for their commitment to SL. The principles of fairness and authenticity described by Mertens (cf. 2010: 16-18) were followed. Thus, I followed inclusive representation from all four groups in the population. I also established a trusting relationship with the participants from the partnerships, characterised by confidentiality and respect.

I am acutely aware of the non-generalisability of the study, as it only refers to the context I practice in, at a specific time (2011-2013). However, as authors we suggest that the principles for KS can be used in any SL partnership context.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are discussed below. Various other studies, as already presented in the literature review, support these findings.

4.1   Champions for service learning

The first question put to participants was: "Who are the champions in a service learning partnership?" The responses to this question are outlined in table 1.

Table 1: Champions for service learning

Categories	Sector	Sub-sector
Champions in a community of practice	HE sector	• Academics • Students • SL support staff
	Service sector	• Managers of NPOs • Staff at NPOs
	Community sector	• Community leaders • Community members
	International academic pioneers sector	• Senior pioneers • Junior pioneers

Participants indicated that champions could be situated in any of the sectors from the triad model followed, and from the international sector that initially (and in some instances still do) informed SL in SA. These potential champions are outlined in table 1. As defined in the introduction, a champion is someone who serves as a role model for others in the SL field. This definition is confirmed and extended by an authentic description that spontaneously emerged from the data, as the participants identified champions. The participants' definition is presented as a summary:

> *A champion is someone who is knowledgeable. The practice of service learning champions portrays a standard of excellence. They care unconditionally for others and share their expertise to change society towards a common good for all.*

In line with the participants' definition, Stanton, Giles and Cruz (1999: 10) refer to early SL practitioners as pioneers, when capturing the "independent, entrepreneurial, path breaking work of those who explored new approaches in any field […] and who went before, preparing the way for others".

We posit that a champion cannot act alone. Within a community of practice, partners from different sectors influence one another, because they share passion towards societal change, and interact regularly in order to learn how to do it better. In the academic sector, champions may not really be able to initiate change. However, their research and academic background may guide and motivate partners in the other sectors. It is within the service and community sector, where the need for change for the common good is most crucial. Here, local champions bring change. However, they again search for guidance from academic partners to initiate more structured and empowering societal change.

Kaars and Kaars (2014: 176) state that they, as non-profit sector managers, experienced how partners were reciprocally enabled by sharing knowledge within partnerships. We conclude this argument with the voice of one of the international participants:

> *There may be big champions that have more profile, but everybody is a champion in their own backyard, and their own context. So if somebody in a small village in South Africa is making some change, they're a champion. That is where the difference is made, not in the university classroom, not at the conference level, or when you are giving a keynote address, but when somebody does something with it. The local champions – they may do it in partnership with some bigger champions, but you always need the local champion. You can never do it without the local champion (IP4).*

To answer the second question, the participants shared their perceptions.

4.2   Role of knowledge sharing

Participants were asked: **"What are your perceptions regarding the role of knowledge sharing in the development of current and new service learning champions?"**

We argue that if findings of explored perceptions of selected champions regarding the role of KS in SL partnerships are shared, current and new champions could be developed. The analysed data depicted in table 2 support our argument.

Table 2: The role of knowledge sharing in the development of champions

Categories	Themes	Sub-themes
Development of current and new champions for service learning	Cognitive domain (head)	• Intellectual knowledge • Reflective knowledge
	Psychomotor domain (hands)	• Service-knowledge
	Affective domain (heart)	• Social knowledge • 'Self'-knowledge
Empowerment of current and new change agents	Social responsibility	• Educational transformation • Social justice
Development of relationships within partnerships	Reciprocal togetherness	• Knowledge and understanding • Service and expertise • Care
Legitimisation of SL	Publication about SL	• Community-engaged participatory research
Development of the SL field	New champions	• Identify • Motivate • Support • Recognise • Mentor

Involvement in SL advances a person to develop holistically (Stanton et al. 1999: 219). The participants voiced that the sharing of different kinds of knowledge, within different domains, could develop current and new champions for SL. These are outlined in table 2. Their heads (cognitive domain) can be developed by receiving intellectual stimulation, practising reflection and sharing of reflective knowledge as their own unique understanding. Their hands (psychomotor domain) can be developed by rendering service and gaining experience through involvement and engagement, and sharing of service-knowledge. Their hearts (affective domain) can be developed by receiving social knowledge through cultural interaction, intra-knowledge sharing, reflection, and discussion about their self-knowledge. To support these findings, empirical data provided by a participant are quoted:

> *…you can identify a champion from what the champion would be doing with knowledge - in this case how far a person is able to share the knowledge; what type of knowledge that is and the benefit that comes out of that knowledge sharing (P4).*

Fletcher (2015: 41) proposes an affective socio-cognitive model of learning. She connects neuroscience to learning, in order to support the process of behavioural change because of interactive experiential learning. According to Fletcher, the brain is an emotional, social and a learning organ. The emotional brain influences affective learning, whereas the social brain seeks out learning in relationships. The cognitive brain influences our focus on information, but in a unique individual way. When reflection is added to experiential learning (EL) and development, neuroscience shows that high level cognitive processing occurs in the brain, such as thinking about experience and action. It is our "self" that enables us to ponder, wonder and critically reflect on our actions (Fletcher 2015: 63). The importance of interpersonal, as well as intrapersonal KS for development of a champion is noted in the following quotation:

> *…in the process of knowledge sharing you are forced to explore and reflect on your own perspectives and articulate meaning from that. The fact that you talk or write, enables you to hear yourself saying: "… but that's my position here and this is how it sounds in comparison to other people's point of view" (P3).*

By developing as a holistic person, potential SL champions can be empowered to act as change agents in society. Again, we argue that only a connected togetherness of champions from different sectors can contribute to successful societal change, depending on the competence, responsibility and interdependence of each champion in the partnership. Thus, KS leads to empowerment of current and new change agents.

A participant in the study echoed these benefits of KS:

> ...can I use one word? Knowledge is empowerment, in a lot of ways. Personally, it goes deeper. It goes personally. Knowledge even teaches empowerment, things that we don't have. I can share my knowledge and empower my own champions at the NPO. That makes us better persons… (P8).

Another participant added:

> …sometimes we still feel helpless in our circumstances in our communities. And for someone to be placed in a position where he feels empowered, he feels he could do something about the situation. I think sharing knowledge is very important. I'm sure it would not have been the case if we were not empowered with the necessary knowledge sharing by other stakeholders (P7).

We posit that KS develops relationships within partnerships. The data revealed that a reciprocal togetherness could lead to the development of richness and depth in partnerships, through sharing of knowledge and understanding, service and expertise, as well as care and friendship. A well-developed partnership can address challenges such as intra-group conflict, placements, logistics, diverse partners and extensive student preparation. Adding empirical evidence to the argument of partnership development, a participant acknowledged the following:

> I realised that the connection with the staff, kids and their parents, and even with me, was on a deeper level than mere work and studies; friendships developed which were precious to me. Because we live in a broken society, it is only when you literally lay your hands on somebody else that SL is really practiced (P7).

We further argue that KS legitimises the field of SL. If all the sectors from partnerships could participate in SL related research, more co-constructed knowledge products such as publications could contribute to the legitimisation of SL. A participant voiced the following to support scholarly development:

> …because we are busy with work that is complex and includes different perspectives, disciplines and dimensions, it would be easier if we could talk together, to understand better (P3).

We conclude our argument of this section and posit that current champions can spawn new champions to expand the SL field, through identification, motivation, support, recognition and mentorship. A participant emphasised the argument by stating: "New knowledge is constructed upon previously shared knowledge" (P5).

An international champion voiced the following when recalling his first experiences in the field:

> *I was 'star struck' by them! They were just so welcoming and there was just this sense of 'this is an important field and we're all moving forward in this together' (IP1).*

Such inspirational championship plays a definitive role in the development of the field.

4.3   Principles of knowledge sharing

The last question that participants were requested to respond to was: **"What principles can be developed to guide the knowledge sharing process among service learning champions?"**

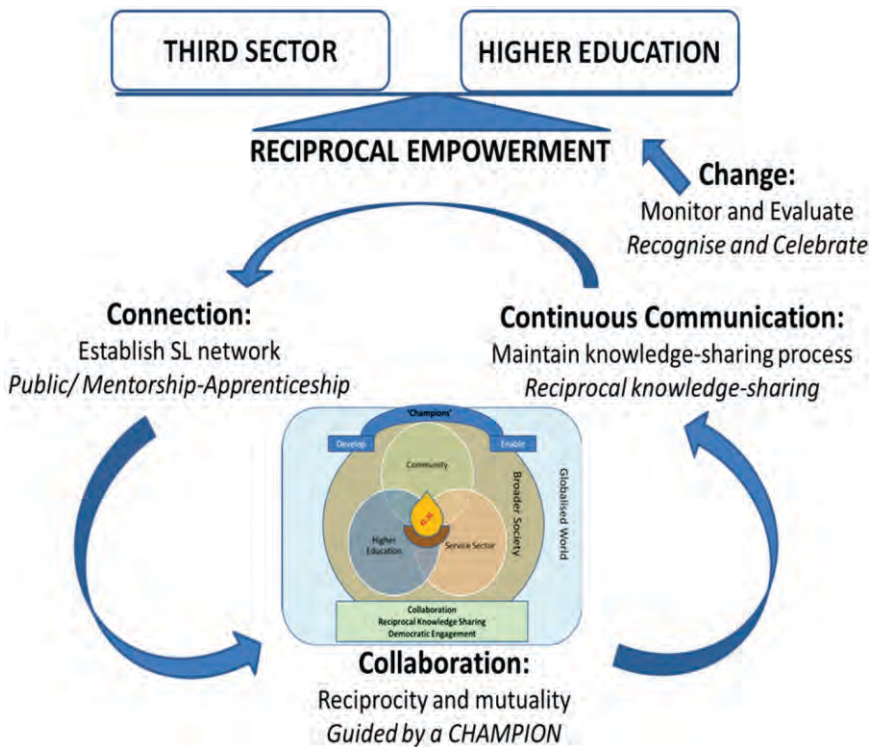Figure 1 outlines a conceptual framework of suggested principles to guide the KS process, as it emerged from the data.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of suggested principles for knowledge sharing (Source: Venter & Seale, 2014: 306)

The KS process (guided by a mentor/champion) should start with a 'connection'. An SL network should be established. It could either be public or by means of a 'mentor-apprentice relationship', as advised by one of the international champions (IP3). Through 'collaboration', a safe platform should be set where goals and values could be clarified, based on reciprocity and mutuality. Through reciprocal KS, by means of reflection and discussion, the partnership should be shaped and challenges and issues can be addressed. Hence, monitoring and evaluation of the partnership through continuous KS could lead to 'change' towards sustainability and societal change. Such change should be recognised and celebrated as successful KS. If change does not occur, the process should be re-evaluated, reflected upon and re-started. Successful KS should be appreciated and cannot occur without the establishment and subsequent deepening of relationships within the partnership. A connected togetherness could follow, and the functioning of the partnership could portray growth. If the advised principles are followed, such a partnership could lead to reciprocal, productive engagement between the service sector, community and higher education. The following quotes serve as empirical evidence of these mentioned principles to guide the KS process:

> So the question people were asking was: How did you survive? How did you improve your practice? And every single person answered: Because we have a network. It was a sharing network, a knowledge-sharing network (IP5).

> There was earnestness. I think we hear more depth in knowledge sharing when that genuine connection is made. It's not superficial. It gets to a point of mentorship–apprenticeship kind of relationship that is going to stay for a long time (IP3).

If we consider these advised principles, the concept of a community of practice clearly emerges. As defined in the introduction of this article, Wenger (2014) mentions the sharing of passion for knowledge, and shared learning towards excellence; thus, the partners benefit from the powerful support within of a community of practice.

With regard to the SL goals, participants voiced that a safe platform ought to exist where co-constructed knowledge could be created and which should provide a safety net for trial-and-error to shape one another's service-and-learning goals. KS could lead to the development of human abilities to enhance communication with partners (understand and listen), before own knowledge can be shared (Naudé 2007: 120). The mentioned platform should also provide a 'connectedness' of understanding to walk the road together and lead others in this complex and diverse field, as emphasised by McMillan (2013: 35). The connectedness should provide space for personal growth. This principle is evidenced by the following quote from a participant:

> *By connecting with each other we all grew personally because it made us feel worthy and SL opened my eyes to become aware of problems in real life (P6).*

However, the participants also warned that partners should not get into a comfort zone within their own community of practice. They should use the knowledge of others in their field, in order to ensure that potential challenges and issues are solved. How could this be done? According to the participants, partners should study and re-visit the literature, reflect, then share and address SL issues collaboratively. Lastly, they should re-imagine their practice and share with others through scholarly work. A participant's response is quoted:

> *…and we could take the knowledge from literature and let it form part of our thinking and doing; we should re-imagine what could happen if we could take the knowledge and incorporate it in what we do together – to form common goals that should help us to move forward on this service learning road (P2).*

Of further importance is SL values. Honesty, respect, trust and reciprocity should guide the KS process in the community of practice. Through value clarification at the onset of the partnership, the KS should not portray power imbalances, but rather a co-constructed set of values (cf. Freire's notion of the pedagogy of the oppressed) (Freire 1970). Such value sharing should contribute to shape the formation of socially responsible critical thinkers. Values should often be revisited through reflective discussion, to ensure that partners are moving forward to develop the SL field.

Lastly, the participants warned that KS should not be forced onto those who do not show a willingness to share SL knowledge. If this happens the field will not develop. A champion for SL should be selective, inviting only those who are ready and willing to share knowledge towards developing the field. The following words from a participant are shared, since literature (Shumer 2000: 79) advises us to share our stories:

> *Provide opportunity for passionate partners to join, but do not manipulate and force people through policies to become part of the field. This field is a heart field. I share my passion with an informal bubbly spirit, through telling about the benefits of SL among my colleagues. For example: I was promoted, or I wrote an article, or I am going to a service learning conference. In the community, for example, I ask: What is your dream? In reaction to their answer I will propose: We learn so much from the community, let us appreciate each other's world; service learning can open doors for you (P1).*

5.   CONCLUSION

As stated before, SL is a complex and dynamic pedagogy filled with depth, richness and mutual learning towards societal transformation.

We added that champions engage at the heart of our SL partnerships as a collaborative endeavour. Thus, we asked who the champions in our community of practice were. Champions could be recognised in any sector of the triad partnership model (higher education, service sector and community sectors). In this study (that involved benchmarking with international academic pioneers), champions could also be identified in the international sector. In reflection upon our KS, a humble appreciation arose that dignifies the contribution of champions from all the sectors. We suggest further research that should focus beyond validation of academic learning, towards a shared re-imagination of co-constructed (academic and local) knowledge as perceived in triad partnerships. An international participant is quoted to motivate our reflection:

> *How do we connect local, regional, national and international champions? You can never do it without the local champion… (IP4).*

As SL is dynamic, we argue that participation in KS within a community of practice (as in this study), can develop all involved, especially those who lead in and explore new experiences. How? KS in SL partnerships promotes the development of competence, responsibility and interdependence. Because of KS, current and new champions are motivated, identified and empowered to 'rock' the proverbial 'boat' towards societal change. Thus, we posit that champions are developed as a whole person (head, heart and hands) when they willingly share knowledge in a partnership. They carefully and gently spawn new champions to develop the field of SL. Through the process of connection, collaboration, continuous communication and change, reciprocal empowerment of all partners in a community of practice follows, built on shared values of mutuality, reciprocity and trust, common goals, and the guidance of a champion for SL. Champions for SL is a reality in SL partnerships. They carry and pass the knowledge torch to new champions. They serve in uncharted territory, towards societal change. They passionately share knowledge and spawn new champions for others to gain understanding of this heart field of SL.

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